The Situation of Communicative Language Teaching Approach in Bangladesh – An Assessment

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Abstract: *The Ministry of Education introduced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in our education system in 90s with a view to promoting communicative competence among our students. All around us we hear the 'buzzing' of CLT and it (CLT) roams in and around educational vicinity. However, how much significant change has it really brought to the learners to use in practical life remains a big question. This study aims at identifying the problems that hinder the implementation of CLT in Bangladeshi. By analyzing a good number of researches in the context of Bangladesh and assessing them in the light of the principles of CLT it is found that lack of teacher training, teacher-centered teaching, faulty testing policy and techniques, examination oriented teaching and learning, harmful backwash, passive learning and ineffective teaching materials are the main obstacles in the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh. Here the researchers depict the situation of CLT approach in Bangladesh.*

KEY WORDS: *CLT, Communicative competence, context, harmful backwash & in service training.*

Introduction

The Ministry of Bangladesh has brought a ground – breaking change in the field of English language teaching and testing system by shifting paradigm from previously followed Grammar – Translation Method (GTM) to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach in mid 90s.The objective of introducing CLT was to enable the learners to use English comfortably and practically in everyday life. In the classroom practical English or everyday use English is hardly practiced. The major concern of the student, teachers and guardians is to manage an impressive grade in English by hook or by crook which is tantamount to real learning. However, CLT approach advocates teaching practices that develop communicative competence in authentic contexts (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). So, the primary focus of CLT is to facilitate learners in creating meaning not in developing grammatical structures or acquiring native –like pronunciation. This means that success of learning a foreign language depends on how well

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learners have developed their communicative competence and how much they are able to apply this knowledge of language in real life situations. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), CLT starts with a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners' communicative competence. Thus the teacher-dominated view has been shifted to the learner-centered view. Today the teacher has to act as a facilitator of learning. This new language teaching policy demanded not only new textbooks but also a new approach of teaching English commonly known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh and Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK in cooperation with National Curriculum Textbook Board (NCTB), started working to facilitate teaching and learning of English in Bangladesh as soon as new language teaching approach was adopted. It paid significant attention to CLT and introduced the approach in the national English curriculum of the country for the first time in 1990s. From 1997, the communicative English tasks were introduced in the compulsory English Textbooks for secondary and higher secondary level students in Bangladesh.

Even after two decades of the introduction of CLT in our country, the objective of shifting the language teaching paradigm is yet to achieve. Unfortunately, we have not seen the success story in the field of teaching English. English language proficiency of our students is really a disappointing aspect. Billah (2015:16) maintains that "the students neither learn correct English nor can they communicate soundly using broken English even". Bangladesh chose English as a second language (ESL) because of its global nature and made it compulsory throughout schooling. Public examination results and students' observable communication skills indicate that students perform poorly in English, with a higher failure rate than other subjects. Our students' prime target is to pass in the examination as the whole education system has been pushed to the door of examination oriented teaching learning situation. Hence, our students cannot use English in their practical life. It is important to find out the challenges our students and teachers have to cope with and what strategies could be adopted to make teaching and learning effective in the classroom.

There are lots of arguments regarding the failure of the new language teaching approach viz. CLT. Some experts consider it as the failure of the approach itself while some other opine that, it is not the approach but the partial implementation of CLT has caused the incongruity and ultimately made the teaching scheme unsuccessful one.

With the advent of CLT newly developed teaching materials have been introduced which are more or less nicely designed but we think majority of our language teachers are not proficient enough to use these materials in the classrooms. On top of that, our language testing system is also problematic which is blamed for creating harmful backwash. We assume that CLT has never been truly implemented in Bangladesh. It should be remembered that ' in courses

based on principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) , it is important that these principles are reflected , not only in curriculum documents and syllabus plans, but also in classroom activities, patterns of classroom interactions, and in tests of communicative performance. (Nunan,1988:5)

2. Problems to be investigated

It is claimed that English curriculum innovation of Bangladesh underlies ' the principal of learning a language by actually practicing it .This practice which is carried out through the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing..'(National Curriculm2010). Although the curriculum emphasizes on the four language skills, examinations cover   mainly - grammar, reading and writing, while the other two skills of listening and speaking are not formally assessed. It is observed that Bangladeshi education administrators have changed pedagogic strategy but the entire teacher community is not well- equipped to implement this new method of teaching and testing at all. The true principles of CLT are absent in the education arrangement of Bangladesh. Teachers are still found to deliver teacher –centered lectures and students are compelled to note down or gulp down those lectures though this is contradictory to CLT. Also learners' participation in the classroom discussion is almost absent. Anwar.N,(2005); Hamid. M.O, & Baldauf, R.B., Jr. (2008); English in Action. (2010); Islam, M. M. (2011); Zainul Islam (2003); Salim and Mahboob(2001).

It is reported that even today the teachers with their old and orthodox views are unwilling to accept the new approach to CLT. A good number of teachers are found to make bizarre comments about CLT based textbooks. 'When CLT came to Bangladesh the traditional English teachers vehemently opposed it because they were not ready for something new'. Selim and Mahboob (2001:141).In fact this sort of teacher resistance is not unusual. While evaluating Pennington's model Canagarajah (2002:137) also predicts, '...There could be significant teacher resistance to new methods and that the values /interests/predispositions of the teachers will mediate the reception of the new method.'

Begum (1999) (cited in Ali, 2011) reports on the mismatch between the learning outcomes and the system of evaluation. If Bangladeshi educators were more knowledgeable about what should be taught and how, it would be easier to develop appropriate assessment. Indeed, when CLT was introduced, we assume our education administration failed to address some vital issues including teacher preparation and reformation in testing and assessment which have heavily affected our language teaching and learning. Hoque (2002), ELT advisor to Bangladesh Open University forecasts   that ''most teachers not trained in CLT would find it difficult to teach and test their students''. It is widely believed that the CLT approach has failed to bring the expected qualitative change in the existing English learning teaching situation. As there is no significant improvement in learning English even after the introduction of CLT textbooks in Bangladesh another researcher, Tahmina (2005) ,raises the question ''Is the Communicative Language Teaching an appropriate Approach   to English

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Language Teaching Context of Bangladesh?'' We presume that there is nothing wrong with the approach but the problem might be with the teachers who are putting it into operation. It is perceived that the change was partial, and partial implementation can be termed as a possible reason of the current state of failure of the CLT approach in Bangladesh.

During my teaching career in Bangladesh, I have noticed that the teachers still teach the students as they were taught by their teachers where rote learning is encouraged and practiced. Begum & Farooqui (2008) found that though communicative approaches have been introduced in the language curriculum, most teachers prefer to follow the traditional grammar-translation method that mainly focuses on the syllabus which is to be completed within a set time with the sole aim of obtaining higher scores in the examination. In the context of second language education , for example , Johnson(1989:6) observed that : ''In many education systems the key question for students , teachers, parents, school administrators, and even inspectors is not , 'Are students gaining in communicative competence ?' but, 'Are they on course for the examination?'

Even after two decades of the introduction of CLT, our English teachers are unsure about our curriculum objectives. To the most of our language teachers teaching of literature and grammar were the only means of teaching English language. The innovation in English language teaching curriculum was not clear to most of the teachers. If we critically observe the following studies, we understand it. We observe that all concerned, including the teachers, students, the paper setters and the examiners should have a good understanding about the objectives of the course and there should be a clear reflection of these objectives in the syllabus. The objectives of the course, the syllabus and the examinations all are independent. If Bangladeshi educators were more knowledgeable about what should be taught and how, then it would be easier to develop appropriate assessment''.

Begum (1999) reports on the mismatch between the learning outcomes and the system of

evaluation. Hamid and Baldauf,(2008) find that ''Thus although the introduction of CLT marked a significant shift in Bangladeshi ELT in theory, there is little evidence to suggest that the policy brought about any significant changes in teaching practice at the school level…''

Haider & Chowdhury (2012) also notice that ''… that lack of trained and competent teachers, faulty assessment system, and shortage of supplementary and bridging materials have made the whole process hard to reach''.

We assume that our policy makers were largely responsible for this state of confusion. Shahidullah (2003) observes that the language curriculum in Bangladesh is designed by senior academics based on some hypothetically perceived needs of the learners.

Our language tests are often accused of being invalid and unreliable (Kabir, 2007). Our testers and assessors need to change their testing/ assessment policy. It

should be realized that ''the quickest way to change student learning is to change the assessment system'' (Tang & Biggs, 1996:159). Over the years there has been extensive discussion , in both the general education and language education literature , of the influence of examinations on teaching and learning(see e.g., Chih-Min Shih(2010);   Ying Zhan & Stephen Andrews(2013); Alderson & Wall,1995;   Wall & Alderson, 1993)

3. English Tests in Public Examinations

Every test is designed with a view to achieving curricular objectives. It is strongly felt that we need to bring some effective changes in testing to make the curriculum innovation workable. As a teacher and tester I have worked over 5 years. The present assessment system in the English language curriculum in Bangladesh is not reflecting the true aspects of CLT. Therefore, the researcher believes that some changes are essential to make the curriculum more dynamic and effective for the learners. It is felt that more in-depth studies are   needed to promote a change in the field of language assessment. The reasons for my interest in studying our curriculum and language assessment are to address the problems and challenges. Besides this, it may put a greater and much needed emphasis on language teacher development in general and it may address some changes in the field of English language assessment at PSC(Primary School Certificate), SSC(Secondary School Certificate) and HSC(Higher Secondary Certificate) levels in particular. Kabir carried out several studies (see Kabir2007 Kabir2008, Kabir2009, Kabir2011) which are directly related to our curriculum designing, testing, teacher education, language acquisition and material evaluation and they have explored the loopholes of our curriculum design and testing.

Thus, this study is designed to explore the factors that hinder the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh. We believe the findings of the study will help our education policy makers to adopt more effective language teaching methodology and testing policy.

As our study deals with the situation of CLT in Bangladesh, the discussion below includes the fundamental concept of CLT, communicative competence and communicative language test.

4. Communicative Language Teaching and Communicative Competence

According to Cook(2003:36) , in a situation where communicative language teaching is in practice '' language learning success is to be assessed neither in terms of accurate grammar and pronunciation for their own sake, nor in terms of explicit knowledge of the rules, but by the ability to *do* things with the language, appropriately, fluently and effectively.''

Communicative language tests are designed with a view to testing communicative proficiency by exploiting communicative events as test items. ''Thus items usually relate directly to language use; tasks in the test are as authentic as possible; knowledge of language function and appropriateness of expression to

social situation are tested'' (Johnson & Johnson 1998:74) when communicative language tests are constructed. Weir (1990:8) has discussed the idea of communicative language ability by summarizing Bachman (1989) in the following manner:

Communicative language ability consists of language competence, strategic competence, and psychological mechanisms. Language competence includes organizational competence, which consists of grammatical and textual competence, and pragmatic competence, which consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Strategic competence is seen as performing assessment, planning and execution functions in determining the most effective means of achieving a communicative goal. Psychological mechanisms involved in language use characterize the channel (auditory, visual) and mode (receptive, productive) in which competence is implemented Richards and Rodgers (2001:160) have discussed communicative competence by referring to Canale and Swain (1980) in the following manner:

> ''Four dimensions of communicative competence are identified: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. *Grammatical competence* refers to what Chomsky calls linguistic competence and what Hymes intends by what is ''formally possible.'' It is the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity. *Sociolinguistic competence* refers to an understanding of the social context in which communication takes place, including role relationships, the shared information of the participants, and the communicative purpose for their interaction. *Discourse competence* refers to the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. *Strategic competence* refers to the copying strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair, and redirect communication.''

After introducing CLT, our education administrators use communicative language testing to measure our students' level of achievement. The discussion above has clarified the concept of communicative language testing and communicative competence. By observing the test performance of our students we infer students' language ability. The tests that we have considered in this study are certainly high stakes tests. They are life changing tests for our students. Hence, those who are involved with these tests development procedure ''have an ethical responsibility to ensure that the decisions that are made on the basis of tests are as trustworthy as possible. The ethical use of language tests involves two related aspects, reliability and validity.''

5. Exploring the Relationship between Teaching and Testing

Teaching is followed by testing where achievement testing is in practice. It is testing that can enable us to measure the level of achievement of a learner. Weir

(1990) observes that in a context where communicative language testing is in practice, tests have tremendous impact on teaching. He says that though a dog wags its tail, even tail wags the dog when ''a communicative approach to language teaching is more likely to be adopted when the test at the end of a course of instruction is itself communicative'' Weir (1990:27). We need to change the test contents and method on regular basis or else the test will become predictable and ultimately it will have damaging impact on teaching and learning. Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995:228) argue that ''if the test format remains fixed for a period of time, it may have the effect of narrowing the curriculum: not only will the test be confined to those elements that are thought testable or convenient, but the teaching in preparation for the test is likely to become restricted to the sorts of activities and abilities that are tested.''

Bachman and Palmer (1996) discuss two key purposes of language tests – i) the primary purpose is to make inferences about language ability and ii) the secondary purpose is to make decisions based on those inferences. However, if there is lack of trust in tests and rater reliability is at stake, we can hardly rely on the test's result. Unfortunately, this mistrust is a very common phenomenon in Bangladeshi English language testing arena. Hughes(2003:1) acknowledges '' too often language tests have a harmful effect on teaching and learning, and fail to measure accurately whatever it is they are intended to measure''. Identified that testing is an ethical activity and test developers have to take responsibility for the effects of tests. McNamara (2000) maintains that this ethical testing practice makes testing 'accountable' to the test takers. He also agrees that tests have effects on teaching and learning which is largely recognized as 'washback'. In addition to these two major issues i.e. accountability and washback, he further feels that we all have to be aware of the test impact i.e. the effect of a test on wider educational and social world. The following discussion is going to illustrate these three crucial issues (accountability, washback and impact) with special attention to washback as this study is mainly concerned with wash back.

6. Implementing CLT in Bangladesh – Challenges and Supports

As we know, the goal of the CLT approach is to teach English for successful communication with the rest of the world. Bangladeshi public English test results demonstrate that students are achieving better in reading and writing than in listening and speaking. This suggests that students fail to achieve successful communication in all the four language skills that are seen as necessary for effective communication. It can be concluded that the CLT approach is not working effectively to develop students' communicative competence; and there is certainly a gap between achievements in written language compared to oral language in Bangladesh. However, Savignon (2003) argues that such failure does not mean that the CLT approach is ineffective, but rather that the problem lies in its interpretation or practice or inappropriate application. She suggests that some modification, according to specific learning contexts, could make CLT more learner-centred. This study tries to explore the possible causes behind this failure.

Different studies show that teachers are generally reluctant to use textbooks and teaching aids and did not adequately prepare for the lessons. The topics covered in the textbooks fail to attract both students and teachers. Besides this, students also said that teachers tended to focus more on the able students in the class and ignored others. As Sirota and Bailey (2009) argue, teachers' preconceptions about learners strongly influence learning outcomes.

Billah(2015) finds that the role of the students is very much passive in the classrooms. It is noticed that teachers are found to engage with a kind of one way delivery in the classroom. We suggest that students have to be made active in the classrooms. Students' active participation requires teachers' creativity in participatory classroom management.

Teachers should not allow or encourage rote learning which is contradictory with CLT. Too much grammar explanation, drilling, teacher-centric classroom teaching and exam oriented teaching should be avoided.

Using authentic materials should be a compulsion in a CLT based teaching context. Those materials expose students to real discourse. Students acquire better and quicker if authentic materials are used, SLA research suggests.

Research findings also confirmed that classes with large numbers of students were one of the major barriers in implementing CLT effectively and caused other related problems. Teachers argued that it was very difficult to manage student interactions in a class where there were sometimes more than 80 students in a session. From class observation, it was also seen that some students did not want to participate and caused disruption in the class.

The wide ranging syllabus and present examination system are also identified as the mention worthy obstacles to the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh. Teachers remain busy to cover the syllabus and students expect that they will find the items in the question papers known. This attitude truly undermines the principles of CLT. As the present tests exclude speaking and listening skills, we understand there is no existence of CLT in true sense. By ignoring these two skills it is impossible to become a successful communicator in the target language (English). ''Change in the question pattern can bring qualitative change in education. The same pattern of question year after year not only makes teachers obtuse, it damages the creativity of the students …'', Billah (2015:112).

It should be accepted that lack of continuous in- service professional development training for the teachers causes the inappropriate and contradictory use of CLT in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

We feel that conventional attitude towards English language teaching and learning need to be changed. Our students should not learn English to use it rather they should use language to learn it. Teachers should be provided with in-service

training facility so that they can learn the art of teaching English as it is expected in CLT based teaching context. The traditional testing system and teacher dominated classroom teaching should averted with a view to making CLT effective.

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